

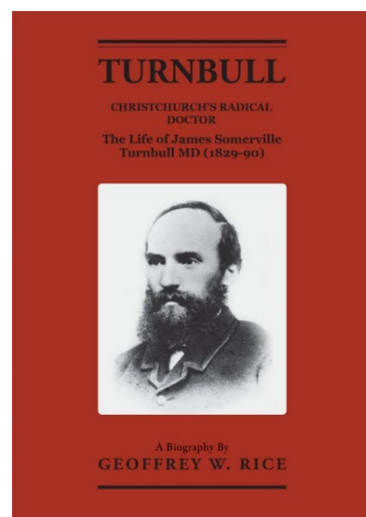
# Turnbull: Christchurch's Radical Doctor

## The Life of James Somerville Turnbull MD (1829-90)

A Biography by Geoffrey W. Rice.

Paperback, 363 pages ISBN 978-0-473-8090-71691-2

James Turnbull was probably Christchurch's best-known and most colourful doctor in the second half of the nineteenth century. He had one of the largest general practices in the city yet was also a long-serving visiting physician at Christchurch Hospital and a board member. Turnbull was an immensely energetic and active public figure, declaring himself 'a radical to the backbone' in politics. He was twice elected to the Canterbury Provincial Council and was a member of the Selwyn County Council as well as the first president of the Canterbury Medical Society and Dean of a proposed medical school which never eventuated.



Yet his colleagues found him maddeningly difficult to work with as he changed his mind and his allegiances so suddenly. He strenuously opposed the city's major drainage plan of the 1870s, claiming that sewers would become 'elongated cesspools', and the project was delayed for over a year. On the Canterbury College board of governors he opposed the site on Worcester Street, pushing for a site in the Domain, and delayed that project by a year as well. In the struggle for control of Christchurch Hospital, he seemed oblivious to the conflict of interest between his role as head of the staff and his membership of the board. This so damaged his reputation that he largely withdrew from public life in the 1880s except to defend medical friends who had made foolish mistakes.

Well-meaning, impetuous, mercurial, argumentative, talkative, kind-hearted, generous, restless, energetic, arrogant, hypocritical, careless with money – Turnbull was a bundle of contradictions but he was without doubt one of the most interesting and controversial of Christchurch's early doctors.

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## About the Author

Geoffrey W. Rice

DR GEOFFREY RICE was Professor and Head of History at the University of Canterbury until his retirement in 2012. He is now Professor Emeritus and secretary of the Canterbury History Foundation. Known internationally for his research on the 1918 influenza pandemic in New Zealand, he has written or edited twenty books, along with numerous short essays and academic articles. He was appointed ONZM in 2021 for services to historical research and tertiary education.

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[geoff.rice@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:geoff.rice@canterbury.ac.nz)